



July 2001

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## Taking the mystery out of classification

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Hollywood has elevated the spy story to a cliché. A megalomaniac steals U.S. secrets and a U.S. agent fends off an army of goons as he retrieves the secrets, gets the girl and saves the world, all in two hours.

Service members even buy into this. Ever had someone answer your question with, “If I told you, I’d have to kill you”?

But, like every cliché, there is some truth. The United States does have secrets, and foreign governments or groups want to learn them. Everyone associated with DoD has a duty and responsibility to protect classified information.

But just what is classified information?

There are three classifications: confidential, secret and top secret. The definitions are essentially the same, just the magnitude changes.

“Confidential” information is the lowest classification. Information is deemed confidential if its release “could cause damage to national security or foreign relations.”

DoD classifies information as “secret” when its release “could cause serious damage to national security or foreign relations.”

Information is classified as “top secret” when its release “could cause exceptionally grave damage to national security or foreign relations.”

People are cleared for access to classified information if their jobs require it. The department conducts a clearance investigation to ensure an individual is trustworthy and reliable. According to the Defense Security Service, a personnel security investigation looks at an individual for the qualities of trustworthiness, honesty, loyalty and reliability. In addition, investigators examine a person’s character and finances.

Service members, DoD civilians and contractor employees receive clearances for classified information. The higher a person’s access to classified information, the more thorough the investigation. The Defense Security Service and other federal agencies conduct national agency checks and local agency checks on individuals for confidential and secret clearances.

Investigators conduct single-scope background investigations for individuals needing a top secret clearance.

Individuals are periodically reinvestigated to maintain their clearances. Secret clearances are updated every 10 years and top secret every five.

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